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Winnebago Berdache

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THE following account draws attention to the fact that the berdache role was still evident in Winnebago culture until close to the turn of the century, and adds somewhat to the data of certain clear cultural parallels between this Woodland Siouan group and such Plains Siouan tribes as the Omaha, Oto, Iowa and Ponca. The description is not complete and certain points are equivocal. Thus, all of the available ethnographic documentation will be presented so that anyone intending to use the information will be able to assess its value. The description given here agrees, Dr. Raul Radin said in a conversation, with his unpublished Winnebago data.

During the course of general field investigations conducted from time to time during the years 1945 to 1947, it was apparent that Winnebago informants in Wisconsin tended to be reticent to discuss the matter of the berdache. Their embarrassment may indicate that knowledge of the subject was withheld. However, even where excellent rapport existed and individuals became sufficiently interested in the topic to question people who might not speak directly to an ethnographer, some details remain uncertain. Furthermore, while the last berdache died somewhat over fifty years ago, the picture is confused by the former tendency of Winnebago culture to invest given forms of traits with opposite meanings and functions when used under different circumstances. At the present time, the recollections of many informants reveal that they know only half of the total function of given forms, or that they attempt to synthesize features which now appear as contradictory.

While it was noted in 1950 that the Nebraska Winnebago were quite willing to speak of matters that in Wisconsin are still considered sacred or as things to be kept secret from whites, the Nebraska Winnebago simply knew less about older traditions.

It was agreed generally that the berdache was a man who had taken on this role because he had been directed to do so by the moon, a female spirit, at the time of his vision quest. The berdache dressed as a woman, performed women's tasks better than any normal woman could perform them, and had the ability to foretell future events. However, not all Winnebago prophets were berdaches. One informant mentioned that berdaches sometimes married other men, but no data were obtained concerning the attitude of the society toward the husband of a berdache. Most informants felt that the berdache was at one time a highly honored and respected person, but that the Winnebago had become ashamed of the custom because the white people thought it was amusing or evil. By the time the last known berdache attempted to fulfill the role, his brothers threatened to kill him if he "put on the skirt." This berdache then affected a combination of male and female clothing, fearing that he would die if he did not at least attempt to follow the directions given him in his vision of the moon.

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The Winnebago term for berdache is very uncertain. The last known case in Wisconsin was called dejáŋčowiŋga, usually translated as Blue Lake Woman (dejáŋčowiŋga—dejáŋ: lake or sea; čo: blue; wiŋ: female name ending; ga: name referrent suffix). In Nebraska mention was made of another berdache who had lived in Wisconsin and was called čoraŋaŽiŋga or Standing Blue (čoraŋaŽiŋga—čo: blue; ra: article; naŽi: to stand; wiŋ: elided with naŽi as naziŋ, female name ending; ga: name referrent suffix). The term ŽiáŋgE was suggested as a general word for berdache by two Wisconsin informants, and it was translated by several people as "a no good," "a eunuch," "an unmanly man." This word was still in common use in Wisconsin in 1947, but was used among young men as an insult or teasing epithet. These young men claimed to know nothing more about the word except that it carried connotations of weakness and effeminateness.

The characteristics of the Winnebago berdache agree closely with those reported for the Omaha and Ponca but the word used to designate a berdache in both of these latter tribes was mi^{a}-qu-ga, according to Dorsey (378–379). Among the Oglala the berdache had been blessed by a pote wi^{a}kte or hermaphroditic buffalo, wi^{a}kte being the word for berdache. A certain amount of shame had become attached to the role among these Plains Siouan groups by the time it was reported by Dorsey in 1889 and Wissler in 1912, but Wissler (p. 92) said of the Oglala, "In the old days all the berdaches were very wakaŋ."

Knowledge of the berdache among the Winnebago was provided in 1946 through a chance conversation with M.M., a woman who was then about thirty years old. Her parents had been the first Christian converts at the Winnebago community near Black River Falls, Wisconsin, and M.M. had once heard her mother mention "Men who dressed as women." When M.M. attempted to question her mother, at the writer's request, for more information about the berdache, the mother, then a woman in her seventies, became very angry and said in Winnebago, "Why did you ask about that? That is something we want to forget and not talk about."

Another woman, S.S., a younger sister of Radin's famous informant Crashing Thunder, was next approached and she offered the following account.

> Yes, I used to hear about that, but I don't know much about it. Once there was a man who fasted and he learned that if he dressed like a woman he would be the richest person in the world, but if he wore men's clothes, he die soon. She wore earrings, and bracelets, and necklaces and a shirt like a woman, but his brothers told him . . . her? . . . if he . . . she? . . . put on a skirt they would kill him. There used to be people like that, not just that one. I think ŽiáŋgE is the word for them but I don't know, now it's just a slang word and means a no good. Those people did women's work, and they did it real good, better than even women could.

Later M.M., the original informant, was able to prevail upon her mother to provide more information. Her description included all of the points given above except mention of wealth accruing to the berdache. However, M.M.'s mother added that berdaches had been blessed by the moon and had the gift

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124 838 of prophecy. The name dejáŋčowiŋga was given as applying to the story told by S.S., and this berdache was described as a "bachelor," who at one time had acted as a foster mother to several children belonging to his sister or half-sister. One of the nieces reared by dejáŋčowiŋga was still living near Black River Falls in 1946, but it was impossible to obtain any direct information from her. She was about fifty-five years old in 1946.

At the Wisconsin Dells two Winnebago men overheard M.M. and the writer discussing dejáŋčowiŋga and one of them, a contemporary of M.M., recalled that he had heard of dejáŋčowiŋga whose brothers had threatened to kill him if he "put on the skirt." The other man, who was born in 1898 or 1899, said that he would try to obtain more information for the writer from his maternal and paternal uncles, two elderly men who lived near Tomah, Wisconsin. J.S.'s uncles merely substantiated as much as was already known of the dejáŋčowiŋga story without clarifying the term applied to berdaches generally. However, J.S. believed that an old man who lived near Victory, Wisconsin could supply more data, and some time later had an interview with him. This was reported several months later, in March, 1947. J.S. said that the old man had considered the matter a "bad story" and only agreed to tell it because J.S. had done him several favors. At one time, the old man had explained, a band of Winnebago returned from a war expedition with several Sioux captives, among them a chief. Under ordinary circumstances the warrior (hawk) clan would have taken charge of the ultimate fate of the prisoners, but in this village the only members of the warrior clan were a very small boy and his grandmother. The grandmother was called upon to speak for the grandson because, while the decision should have rested with the male members of the clan, the only male member present was a child. What became of the chief's followers is not known, but the grandmother decreed that the leader was to remain in the village unharmed, but had to dress, act, work and generally conduct himself as a woman as long as he lived. This took place many years ago and no one knows why the grandmother took such a harsh stand except that possibly she had some old grudge against the Sioux. J.S. reported that the old man told him this was the "first dejáŋčowiŋga," and, as far as could be determined, the term liáŋge was not used.

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838 124 Upon further questioning by J.S., the old man qualified the foregoing story by saying that other men, who were members of the Winnebago tribe, dressed and acted like women because they had been told to do so by the moon at the time of their vision quest. These men were highly respected, were prophets, could do women's work better than women, and sometimes even married other men.

The fact that transvestites who conducted themselves as women were not always true berdaches is illustrated in another story collected from M.R. in the winter of 1945. M.R. died in 1946 at the age of fifty years and he was never questioned as to the relationship of the following story to cases of true berdaches because the significance of the matter was not then clear to the writer.

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According to M.R., a party of Winnebago once went on the warpath and were badly beaten. One man, the only survivor according to his claim, returned to his village. There he recounted his valorous deeds at the side of his companions, and said he had escaped only because the enemy had left him for dead. He was accorded great honor until sometime later another member of the party returned and told how the first man had fled and hidden out in the woods when he saw that the battle was going against the Winnebago. The cowardly and dishonest warrior, on the decision of the police (bear) clan, then had to take on the role of a woman and lived in disgrace the rest of his life.

Evidence concerning the berdache was even less definite in Nebraska. G.P., a woman about fifty years old in 1930, mentioned that her mother-in-law once told her of a case which agreed in most details with that of dejáŋčowiŋga, but this individual was called čoŋanáliŋga and was supposed to have lived in Wisconsin. However, G.S., a man born in 1887, who also told of čoŋanáliŋga, gave an account of a berdache who was his mother's cousin. G.S.'s mother was Iowa and Oto through her maternal line and the berdache cousin, referred to as "sister," was a parallel cousin of Iowa and Oto descent. However, the description G.S. recounted as having come from his mother is almost identical to that regarding the Winnebago berdache. The cousin had been blessed by the moon, feared death if he disobeyed the moon's directions that he dress and act as a woman, even to giving this as the reason for his behavior when G.S.'s mother once remonstrated with him for being, "a shame to us Indians."

An attempt was made to discover whether the Winnebago berdache role for men had a parallel Siouan role of "warrior women." Only one very doubtful account was collected in 1946 from S.S. the Wisconsin informant who provided the first extensive description of dejáŋčowiŋga.

Once there was a man, kind of high tone, he had two wives. The older one wanted to keep her husband so she had him marry her younger sister too. They used to do that years ago when they wanted to hold their husbands. Anyway, this man and his gang went off to the Civil War. There was a bad woman in the camp. She was a good looker, but she was bad, and this man took the bad woman with him. During the war one time they ran out of bullets, and this woman got on a horse and went through the enemy lines to a big city and came back with a whole lot of bullets and saved them. Another time she warned them when they were all asleep and the enemy was near. When they came back, she was riding on the horse in front of the man, and the men had all given her presents for saving them. Her waist was just covered with ribbons and the man's two wives cried when they saw it. The people made up a song about her because she was a brave woman and sometimes they still sing it. After that they always called her hinugrosiŋgra which meant that she laughed aloud like a man, shaking her whole body [hinugrosiŋgra—hinuk:woman; ɣo:body; siŋk:to shake as with laughter; ɣa: article; k is voiced when followed by ɣ]. They call those giggling girls that nowadays sometimes.

While the above account probably represents an isolated example of a woman who went to war rather than an accepted type of role, it is apparent that

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the formal role of berdache for men was observed within the memory of people born since 1885, at least in Wisconsin. Of particular interest is the fact that the Winnebago utilized the same characteristics of dress and behavior for two entirely different purposes. In the case of a true berdache, the person held an honored and respected position in the society, while a man who was forced to take on a female role without benefit of a blessing by the moon was disgraced and dishonored.

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